Defining Divinity Down

Yair Lorberbaum
Image of God: Halacha and Agada
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Reviewed by Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz

Jews have long believed that God is abstract, transcendent, and beyond human understanding. And yet, the Bible is rife with anthropomorphic images, ascribing to God both emotions (sadness, anger, regret, pity) and physical attributes (God's "hand," "finger," and "outstretched arm"). Since the time of the Talmud, this contradiction has been resolved by interpreting such images as essentially metaphorical. In his new book, *Image of God: Halacha and Agada*, Yair Lorberbaum now seeks to refute this assumption, and to read the personification of God in the Bible literally.

Lorberbaum, a lecturer at Bar Ilan University's law school and a fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, focuses on the term "image of God" as it appears in the book of Genesis, in the account of Adam's creation. In Lorberbaum's view, the rabbinic interpretive tradition was infused with theological assumptions alien to those which would prevail later, beginning in the medieval period in Europe. In light of this, he suggests a new approach, whereby the rabbinic texts should be understood in terms of the attitudes that prevailed at the time they were written. This rethinking of how we ought to read the rabbinic tradition, Lorberbaum contends, offers a new understanding of the classical Jewish notion of the divine image in man.

Because Adam was created not only in God's "image" but also in his "mold," he is, according to Lorberbaum, in some sense a physical extension of his Creator. For this reason, contrary to the conventional reading, man is indeed capable of grasping the essence of God. This notion of man's attachment to his own Creator, Lorberbaum writes, lies at the basis of rabbinic moral and legal teachings. Indeed, much of this book is devoted

to a discussion of the halachic implications of being created in God's image—how it affects, for example, the biblical imperative to procreate, or the way we are to treat prisoners on death row.

But Lorberbaum's primary innovation is his treatment of the legendary literature, or agada, in which many of the sources dealing with the image of God are to be found. Concerning the relationship between halacha and agada, Lorberbaum employs a model borrowed from the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin, who distinguishes laws from the principles that inspire them. Similarly, Lorberbaum argues that while Jewish law governs the minutiae of how one is to live, the homiletic literature creates a coherent moral and theological worldview that serves as our guide. For this reason, he writes, there is a "close connection in talmudic literature—at least as it deals with the image of God—between agada and halacha." Not only is the agada important, but it also has claim to at least equal status in Jewish tradition with the law.

The first section of *Image of God* surveys fifteen exegetical approaches, ranging from ancient to modern, to anthropomorphism in the biblical and rabbinic literature. Each of these approaches tries in its own way to reconcile anthropomorphic descriptions of God with the theological assumption of God's incorporeality.

Lorberbaum, however, sees these descriptions as the principal characteristics of God in the scriptural and rabbinic view. He treats "the image of God" as a notion that "expresses a certain relationship, which stands as the basis for most of the idolatrous rituals which characterized the ancient world." In these rituals, idols were not literally associated with the gods; rather, they were seen as extensions of them, with the ability to draw on divine powers and manifest them on earth. God could then continue to be distant, but his image in man allowed people to apprehend him in actual terms—that is, to feel close to him. In reality, however, idols eventually displaced the gods they represented and were worshipped in and of themselves.

Lorberbaum maintains that the sages understood "the image of God" in a similar vein: Man, they believed, is a physical expression of God's form. Not an *equal* expression, they were careful to point out, but a reflection. In other words, although man and God are not identical, and although man exists apart from God, he is still a kind of divine presence on earth, or

what may be called a "projection of God." As Lorberbaum explains:

> There is another difference between "innocent" anthropomorphism and the notion of man as the image of God. The naive version describes theophanies in human terms, but maintains a distance between God and man. Not so with the notion of the image of God, which blurs the distinction. God is made present through his image—in this case, man—which in turn becomes an extension of him.

But is this understanding of "the image of God" faithful to the biblical and rabbinic literature? Lorberbaum's view that man is an earthly manifestation of God actually contradicts the many sources which indicate an unbridgeable chasm separating man from God.

God explains to Moses, for example, that human beings cannot look at him directly, "for no man shall see me and live." In the words of Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Yossi, God transcends creation entirely: "I am the Eternal Shaddai—I am he, for the world and all its inhabitants are not worthy of my divinity." And Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Halafta underscores the distance between the human and the divine when he asserts that "The divine presence has never descended [to earth], nor did Moses and Elijah ever ascend to heaven." These are but a few examples of a pervasive theme in the sacred texts that posits a hidden God beyond both physical reality and human perception.

Lorberbaum is well aware of the problematic nature of his argument, and to shore it up he turns to the theologian Edmond Cherbonnier, who in a seminal article called "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism" compares the religious experience as presented in Scripture with the human experience. "Knowing the biblical God," wrote Cherbonnier, "is much like knowing the Other." The biblical God is by no means one-dimensional; his character is complicated and unpredictable—almost humanly so. In fact, Lorberbaum argues, it is precisely this nearly human aspect of God that makes him ultimately unknowable to man. Just as man is incapable of fully apprehending another human being, he is similarly unable to reach a complete understanding of God. Hence even if we were to accept anthropomorphisms at face value, God would retain a dimension of incomprehensibility and mystery.

The main thrust of his book, it turns out, concerns not the anthropomorphic aspects of God, but the *theomorphic* aspects of man. Lorberbaum seeks not to diminish God by

comparing him to man, but to elevate man by means of his Godly elements. Lorberbaum's discussion of God's human characteristics merely serves to anchor his contention regarding man's Godly characteristics. If man was literally created in the image of God, he is indeed worthy of veneration. If, however, there were no equivalence between man and an entirely abstract, transcendent God, man's value would be diminished.

Ultimately, however much Lorberbaum's extensive research demonstrates man's centrality in Jewish thought, and the importance of this idea in establishing a humanistic approach to religion, his assertion that the biblical and rabbinic literature present an anthropomorphic conceptualization of God is simply not convincing. In the end, time-honored readings still offer truer solutions to the questions he poses.

Elliot Wolfson, professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University, offers one such reading. Humanizing references to God in traditional sources, he says, are designed simply to enable human beings to imagine God in the mind's eye. Wolfson's term for this view is "docetism," a word borrowed from the early Christian sects that denied Jesus' humanity, claiming that all stories about the Christian savior as a man are fictional. Anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible, the Talmud, and medieval mystical literature can, in Wolfson's view, all be interpreted as types of docetism that seek to give man the tools with which to imagine a transcendent God. When God is portrayed as a warrior or a force of nature, for example, these are only constructs that aim to represent what exists beyond any tangible experience.

Lorberbaum, rejects Wolfson's premise on the grounds that it is not provable. In so doing, however, he ignores the large body of evidence that points to the pervasive influence of docetism on talmudic literature. For example, one midrash that deals with a verse describing the transmission of the Tora at Mount Sinai reads as follows: "And Mount Sinai was engulfed in smoke, since the Eternal had descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace." The text is problematic on two counts: First, it appears that the phrase "and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke" is redundant. Second, the comparison of the smoke on the mountain to a furnace contradicts the description of Mount Sinai as being completely ablaze. The midrash replies that the Creator sought to minimize the awesome event to allow the human mind to comprehend it, or, as the midrash says, "to

appease the human ear." A mountain completely ablaze is not an easy sight to take in, whereas a mountain resembling a man-made furnace is somewhat more so. Human limitation alone requires corporeal descriptions, since the mind is unable to encounter the divine without physical manifestations that translate the divine into terms that man can grasp.

None of this contradicts the view that God is absolutely transcendent; rather, it underscores the fact that it is God who allows man to experience his presence within the confines of human intellect. Indeed, a similar view is held by Saadia Gaon, and even more pointedly by the Hasidei Ashkenaz of medieval Europe, for whom God is "exceedingly subtle, wondrous, unknowable, hidden, and concealed." Man can apprehend God's glory subjectively, yet at that moment he becomes aware that the apparition is tailored to his limited capabilities, since the true essence of God lies beyond him.

Indeed, Lorberbaum's groundbreaking thesis too often rests on shaky textual readings and prejudiced conclusions—ironically, the very faults he finds with the accepted exegetical tradition he criticizes. Yet despite this, *The Image of God* is undoubtedly one of the most important works of Jewish scholarship published in the past year, bringing innovative research to bear on a rich breadth of sources. It also manages the impressive feat of describing the notion of "the image of God" in all its philosophical and practical permutations. Indeed, Lorberbaum illustrates with great skill the central place in the Jewish worldview of man, who seeks a God who is at once both familiar and so very remote.

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